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India: Treatment of Dera Sacha Sauda practitioners by political parties, society and government authorities (2009-April 2012)

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1. About the Dera Sacha Sauda

The website of the Dera Sacha Sauda (DSS) indicates that the DSS is a "socio-spiritual" organization founded in 1948 that "preaches and practices humanitarianism and selfless services to others" (n.d.a). According to the website, DSS followers "learn to meditate and follow [DSS] principles" (DSS n.d.a). The BBC describes the organization as a "multi-religious sect" (BBC 16 Dec. 2009), while other sources refer to it as a "cult" (Panthic.org 3 Jan. 2011; *The Economic Times* 26 Jan. 2012; *The Times of India* 23 Jan. 2012), "religious sect" (*The Tribune* 18 Oct. 2011), or "controversial sect" (*Hindustan Times* 26 Feb. 2012). The headquarters of the organization are located in Sirsa, Haryana (DSS n.d.a; *Hindustan Times* 28 Nov. 2011). The DSS leader is Sant Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh, who is also known as Guru Ji (DSS n.d.b).

The BBC reports that followers are predominantly from "lower caste Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs across the states of Punjab, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan" (16 Dec. 2009). According to the *Hindustan Times*, the DSS has "significant support" in several districts of the Malwa region and a "limited" influence in the Doaba and Majha belts (28 Nov. 2011). India's financial newspaper, *The Economic Times*, notes that 3,500,000 or 70 percent of "devotees" are in Malwa and the rest are in Doaba and Majha (26 Jan. 2012). According to the DSS website, there are about forty million DSS followers around the world (n.d.a).

The DSS is known for its fight against drug and alcohol abuse, its "green campaign" (*Hindustan Times* 17 Jan. 2012; *ibid.* 18 Jan. 2012), and its campaign to stop the spread of the HIV virus (BBC 16 Dec. 2009). As part of its 2009 HIV campaign, more than 1,000 DSS members, following a call from the DSS leader, "signed pledges to marry ... sex workers" in order to "stop the women from being exploited" (*ibid.*). In 2012, DSS followers donated hundreds of bodies to medical educational institutions, which helped to "provide better medical education to students" (*Hindustan Times* 11 Feb. 2012).

2. The Spiritual Leader of Dera Sacha Sauda

Sources report that rape and murder charges have been brought against the leader of the DSS (BBC 16 Dec. 2009; *The Times of India* 22 May 2011). The *Times of India* reports that the DSS leader is scheduled to appear in court in May 2012 in "connection with the murder cases of Ram Chander Chhatarpati and Ranjit Singh" (ibid.). The article also states that he "is accused of murder, rape and sexual exploitation in three separate cases filed by the CBI [Central Bureau of Investigation (India n.d.)]" (*The Times of India* 22 May 2011.). According to the *Times of India*, the DSS leader claims that all the cases registered against him are "false" (24 Jan. 2012). Further information about the charges could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate.

3. Political Involvement

Sources indicate that the DSS has a political wing (*Hindustan Times* 28 Nov. 2011; *The Times of India* 25 Nov. 2011; *The Economic Times* 26 Jan. 2012). According to the *Hindustan Times*, the political wing was created before the 2007 assembly polls in Punjab to urge DSS "followers to back Congress candidates, giving a new twist to the electoral and politico-religious affairs" (28 Nov. 2011). Sources state that the DSS political wing directs its followers to vote for a specific party (*The Times of India* 25 Nov. 2011; *The Economic Times* 26 Jan. 2012). The organization collects feedback from the followers, but the leader of the DSS "has the final word on who to vote for" (ibid.). However, in 2011, a DSS spokesperson stated that the "Dera chief ha[d] nothing do to with politics" and the DSS "[did not] ask its followers to vote for any particular party" (*Hindustan Times* 31 Dec. 2011). According to the *Hindustan Times*, the DSS "has a potential to upset electoral calculations of major political parties" (28 Nov. 2011).

The *Times of India* reports that in the 2009 parliamentary elections, DSS followers voted for the Shiromani Akali Dal (hereafter the Akali Dal) party's candidate Harsimrat Kaur Badal (25 Nov. 2011). Sources report that, in 2011 and in 2012, candidates from different political parties were seeking the support of the DSS in the Punjab assembly elections (*Hindustan Times* 31 Dec. 2011; ibid. 17 Jan. 2012; *The Times of India* 23 Jan. 2012). About 150 Malwa candidates were questioned by the DSS political affairs committee in 2012 (*Hindustan Times* 17 Jan. 2012). The *Times of India* reports that the DSS leader did not comment on whether "dera ... directly support[ed] any candidate," but said that "the dera is with those who promise to eradicate social evils like female foeticide, drug abuse and corruption" (24 Jan. 2012).

4. Reports of Forced Conversion

The *Hindustan Times* reports that in February 2012, 49 students from a government school in Punjab's Mansa district, many of whom are Sikhs, "were 'forcibly' taken [by a school principal] to the Dera Sacha Sauda Headquarters in Sirsa, Haryana, on a school trip and 'baptised there'" (26 Feb. 2012). According to the report, students were forced to drink "Jaam-e-Insann," which signified their "conversion" and were forced to shout the "sect's slogans" (ibid.). The principal claimed that the trip was arranged by DSS followers (*The Times of India* 29 Feb. 2012). A DSS spokesperson denied all the accusations, stating that the DSS "never force[s] anyone to adopt [dera] philosophy or become a follower of the dera" (*Hindustan Times* 26 Feb. 2012). Following pressure from Sikh organizations, the authorities suspended the principal (*The Times of India* 29 Feb. 2012).

5. Clashes with Sikh Organizations and Government Response

Several sources report conflicts between DSS followers and Sikh organizations (*The Times of India* 7 Mar. 2011; *Hindustan Times* 26 Feb. 2012; *Punjab Newslines* [3 Jan. 2011]). The *Times of India* reports that the DSS leader has been a target of "Sikh wrath" ever since he dressed up as Sikh guru, Gobind Singh, in 2007 (26 May 2009). Sources state that actions have been taken by the police to protect DSS members (ibid. 7 Mar. 2011; *Punjab Newslines* [3 Jan. 2011]; Panthic.org 3 Jan. 2011). For instance, the *Times of India* reports that two persons were seriously injured as a result of a clash between Sikhs and DSS followers in March 2011 in Dhale Ke village of Moga district (7 Mar. 2011). The police force was deployed to control the situation (*The Times of India* 7 Mar. 2011.).

Panthic.org, an online Sikh news agency (Panthic.org n.d.), stated in January 2011 that the police arrested Sikh preacher Baba Baljeet Singh Daduwal after DSS followers expressed concern that he would speak against the their leader Gurmit Ram Rahim during a speech Baba Daduwal was to give in Bhikhi town of Mansa district (ibid. 3 Jan. 2011). The article claims that the Punjab Government, which is led by the Akali Dal party and its leader Badal, "has again, come up openly in support of the DSS cult" (ibid.). The arrest of Baba Daduwal resulted in a confrontation between Sikhs and DSS followers (*Punjab Newslines* [3 Jan. 2011]). After the unrest, the police charged 61 Sikhs and arrested 57 of them (Panthic.org 3 Jan. 2011).

Sources report that, in October 2011, a court acquitted 14 DSS members charged with killing a Sikh in 2008, because of a lack of evidence (*The Tribune* 18 Oct. 2011; *The Times of India* 18 Oct. 2011; ibid. 10 Nov. 2011).

In January 2012, after a court handed down a verdict of 10 years' imprisonment to Bharpoor Singh and his son for killing a DSS member, "many Sikh organisations have decided to boycott the ruling" (*Hindustan Times* 21 Jan. 2012). Sikh organizations claimed that the accused were "scapegoats" and that the government "engineer[ed] the sentence by incorporating wrong statements in the police inquiry" in order to "please the dera followers because elections were near" (ibid.).

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

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Additional Sources Consulted

Oral sources: Attempts to contact representatives of the following organizations were unsuccessful: All India Christian Council, Christian Solidarity Worldwide, Dera Sacha Sauda, Global Council of India Christians, Movement Against State Repression, and several academics at the universities of British Columbia and Toronto.

Internet sites, including: Amnesty International; Asian Centre for Human Rights; Asian Human Rights Commission; BBC; Freedom House; Human Rights Watch; International Crisis Group; India — Case Status Information System, High Court of Punjab and Haryana; Institute for War and Peace Reporting; International Federation for Human Rights; *Journal of South Asia Women Studies*; Minority Rights Group International; Movement Against State Repression; *Political Handbook of the World*; Radio Free Asia; Refugees International; South Asia Terrorism Portal; Department of Asian Studies, University of British Columbia; University of Toronto — Centre for South Asian Studies, Department for the Study of Religion; UN — UN Development Programme, Integrated Regional Information Networks, Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, Refworld, ReliefWeb, UN Women; US Department of State.

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